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ABSTRACT

Many professors of mass media and society courses have relied on a teaching model implying that students are sponges soaking up information. A more appropriate model invites concern with an active audience, transaction, the interpersonal mass media mix, a general systems approach, and process and change--in other words, utilization of current and developing communication theory. This model assumes that the outcome of communication is self-enhancement and that it is based on the individual's orientation, experience, and background. Rather than being an imposer of knowledge, the teacher tries to create an environment responsive to the knowledge the student already has and to help the student discover the inadequacy of that knowledge. It is necessary to discover the orientations of the students, including what they view as concerns and what they are not concerned about. The professor's task is to reorder and restructure, to meet and challenge the patterning that is discovered in the students. (TJ)

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A Communication Model For Teaching A Course In Mass Media And Society

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A Communication Model For Teaching
A Course In Mass Media And Society

The purpose of this paper is to criticize a teaching paradigm often used in the mass media and society course and to offer an alternative.

The mass media and society course in most journalism programs is something of a problem. It can be a large class, a lower-level introductory course, an upper-level finishing course. It can have students from any number of sequences—perhaps together for the first time. And the list could go on and on.

But perhaps the most difficult—and perhaps most interesting—problem is a mass media and society course that is thought of as a bridge to the social sciences. Such a course, no matter the mix of students, can be a real communication problem for reasons that go beyond demographics.

The course that is to bridge to the social sciences must deal with academic disciplines that have not yet resolved their own approaches, much less reached consensus on appropriate orientations and approaches for teaching.

This confusion has contributed to the spawning of a multitude of orientations to the teaching of the mass media and society course. Text book publishers have been profitably responsive in their supports to this variety.

In coping with all this confusion, an expedient solution often adopted has been for the professor to call upon his/her background, knowledge and experience within the boundaries that he/she perceives to be appropriate for this course. From this orientation, he/she structures information that

the student "needs to know." After all, presumably one of the primary reasons we were all hired was for our expertise—we should know what our students "need to know."

And if a thoughtful professor can find a textbook congruent with his/her organization of the material, it is a re-inforcing confirmation of the organization of what he/she thinks students "need to know." And this is all done before September 1, because, presumably, a good teacher knows how to do it. Given a little lead time—without having interruptions from students—a good teacher is expected to deliver a syllabus, reserve lists for the library, bibliographies and the rest.

The student's opinion of all this work is likely to center on the professor's organization of materials and his/her skills in presentation. The risks in student evaluation—either high or low—are minimized. The student knows what to expect, for the rules of the game are familiar. The student has learned to expect to be told what he/she "needs to know."

The faculty member in the midst of such a format may find that he or she is struggling to incorporate up-to-date—changing—communication theories within a teaching-information paradigm that harkens back to the direct effects of the 1950s. Although the professor may not have intended it, the size of the class and the teaching model he/she is using can lure him/her into accepting as real the appearance of a passive audience—the students busily transposing the content and organization of the professor's second-order cognitions into their notebooks—soaking up the information. They are assumed to be responding in the terms of the 1950s, as sponges.

However, they <u>are</u> active. Even a superficial examination of the scene reveals wily little rascals.[1] Among the things they are doing, they are busy figuring out, as they phrase it, where the professor is

coming from. Generously, one might suggest that they are interested in the biases, values and expectations of a professor who is willing to structure this view of their society and of the profession they have chosen. But realistically, this activity is often likely to be limited to the least painful processing of the information to get through the course ("What's going to be on the test?").

Incidentally, one might conclude after reading Logan's provocative dissertation on journalists and science reporting (1978)[2], that if you examine carefully a generous interpretation of this quest for information about the professor by the wily little rascals, compliance would be considered a dysfunctional example for their professional education and training. After all, is not this same society the territory from which the journalist's stories (new knowledge) will come? If the journalistic paradigm is to work for the student, why is it not appropriate as the example for the professor? In journalism, the professional journalist is expected not to reveal his/her biases, values and expectations to the audience. Regardless of how one may really feel, one is to keep out of the story, maintain objectivity and balance.

A dilemma presents itself to our professor: Presumably social scientists and their hard science bretheren and sisteren have layed on these wily rascals the scientific method in some forty required hours for graduation. The scientific method of acquiring new knowledge makes almost precisely opposite assumptions: biases values and expectations are expected to be announced <u>a priori</u>. Now just how is our thoughtful professor going to handle this? He/she is charged with bridging, and is face to face with the basis of the continuing disenchantment of science with journalism and vice versa.

Another thing the active little rascals are doing: They are experiencing communication pleasure.[3] They are talking with their peers

about dating, intramurals, jogging. Only if the presentation methods and organization are judged totally out of line—either negatively or positively—is it likely that the mass media and society course comes onto the agenda at all. As an aside, if the little rascals are lonely, as many of them are, chances are they are finding no one to talk to about the really important matters of family, what I am going to do with my life and who am I going to spend it with.

The audience is active; communication and learning are taking place. The audience is an obstinate one and transactions are being made but they are on the terms of the student audience rather than on the terms of the communicator. But, we remember, that is the theory the professor is attempting to teach. Chances are good that he/she is in a communications laboratory situation. One of the problems here is the really limited knowledge that we have about communication. The next problem is to make use of what we think we know while being cognizent of the fallibilities of our thinking and knowledge, and thus open to change. How does he/she shift the energies of this obstinate and multi-sequenced segmented audience to mass media and society problems?

This paper suggests a paradigm which invites concern with an active audience, transaction, the interpersonal mass media mix, general systems approach, process and change, etc. In other words, utilization of current and developing communication theory.

A conceptual base for this communication paradigm rests, then, upon the notion of the pluralistic audience and upon the importance of knowing the concerns and self interests of that student audience if one is to expect meaningful communication—learning.

For our purposes here, the teaching phase of the communication paradigm can be contrasted with the information paradigm we have now attributed to our thoughtful professor. The locus of the communication paradigm is the

individual student. It is assumed that the outcome of communication is self-enhancement—the basis of transactions. Necessarily communication can be expected to be based upon the individual's orientation, experience and background—his/her apperceptive mass. This apperceptive mass not only filters for the structuring process but what is considered to be new knowledge is fed back—modifying the apperceptive mass. Much of communication research is aimed at understanding consonance and/or dissonance within this process.

Perkinson's essay on Karl Popper[4] calls attention to the teaching phase of the communication paradigm in another way:

> All learning, all growth of knowledge, according to the Popper-Darwinian theory, consists of the modification or rejection of some form of knowledge that was there previously. And such modification results from the observed inadequacies of the previously held knowledge. So, anyone who learns something new—whether it is Boyle's law or how to kick a football, or how to save money—is simply modifying a theory, a skill, or a disposition he already had, even if in some gross, vague, or unarticulated form.

Applying this line of thought, the contrast between what we are calling the information paradigm and the communication paradigm becomes sharper.

In the information paradigm, the locus is the communicator who has charged himself with the transmission of knowledge. But, as Perkinson says"

> The trouble with the transmission conception of the education process, which has reigned since Aristotle, is not simply that it is wrong, but that it results in an authoritarian construction of education.
>
> Construing education as a process of transmission converts it into imposition. . . . The argument against imposition is that it prevents growth. . . . (I)n all cases the student learns through trial and error elimination. So when teachers and schools try to impose learning, they are simply coercing students to adopt <u>their</u> criteria for identifying errors. They are saying, in effect, "All Knowledge that is contrary to this knowledge we present to you is false." This prevents growth.

In modern communication theory terms, Perkinson could be said to be referring to transaction, change and the like. His process of modification of knowledge is similar to what we have called the activity of the apperceptive mass. He is urging us to set aside authoritarian models (direct effect models) in favor of a model "assuming that the student already possesses knowledge, and assuming, secondly, that the student is the source of growth. Rather than an imposer of knowledge, the teacher tries to create a critical environment, an environment responsive to the knowledge the student has, an environment that will help the student discover the inadequacy of that knowledge and encourage him to modify it."

A further exploration of this notion of the critical environment is essential, and Karl Popper's Conjectures and Refutations[5] can be profitably reread with education in mind.

Given all of this, the professor is still charged with putting the course together that is described as mass media and society. And careful attention to the previous paragraphs indicates that following an information paradigm format in structuring what his/her students need can lead into a thicket of problems.

But we counsel caution for ourselves here, too. In advocating the use of a teaching-communication paradigm we are cognizent that there is not a static body of communication theory, and moreover that with our differing apperceptive masses we are not likely to see the theories that are available in the same manner, that all of us recognize that there are an abundance of shortcomings in communication methodologies, and that students are themselves not static and are as fallible as we.

Yet one can recognize that there are some essential ingredients in establishing our view of a Popperian critical atmosphere: Such underpinnings

include support and responsiveness that encourages open interaction between students and their peers, between students and faculty, in regard to ideas, opinions, expectations toward the subject matter. These in turn lead to possibility of challenge and refutations—the bottom line of Popper's theory.

One needs to know how many significant "orientations" (ideas, opinions, expectations" one can expect in this interaction. Stephenson, in his work with segmentation, psychographics[6], suggests the practicality of dealing with no more than three such orientations in most cases. He gives convincing evidence that in most situations, the language, themes and important differences in ways of approaching a given area can be limited to even such a small number.

The next step is a difficult but rewarding one. It is to manifest an understanding of these orientations, for the faculty member must extend his/her appreciation of the important and valid—although different—approaches. Communicating that understanding and concept of appreciation and validity to the student groups involved becomes the basis of the support and notion of responsiveness that we describe. The reward, of course, is that one discovers that one is modifying one's own apperceptive mass.

Basic communication theory mandates a finding of the communality (or the consensus) between the orientations. In our segmentation study this year[7], the common concerns of our students dealt with two areas: government and a wish to do something important, something to benefit society. The professor will have little difficulty using these notions as a base for whatever subject in mass media and society that he or she wishes to talk about.

Another matter is to determine what the students say they are not concerned about. In order to expand the systems with which the students are prepared to deal, make more complex their orientation, add depth and understanding, one is forced to carefully utilize the principle of canalization so

as to associate the items of little saliency with matters the group has accepted and viewed as important.

It seems likely that students will identify as journalists and be concerned with this dilemma: How to bring an audience's attention to matters that they have not yet recognized as being in their scene?

In our work, students from all orientations gave little saliency to the notion expressing an anticipated growing hostility of the people toward journalism as their lives are uncovered more and more. One might relate this notion of privacy to the strong, commonly held concern about possible increased government intervention in media.

Next, when one examines the strongly held opinions of each of the orientations, one is at the heart of the communication problem. How can one possibly expect to affect meaningful communication in an environment wherein multiple orientations pre-exist? In our study, the correlation between the two orientations of our seniors was only .216.

As the individual student develops his/her self-interest relating to the problems of mass media and society, to the orientations of his/her peers toward these problems, and to the profession and to society as he/she perceives them, the professor and the student must recognize that the goal is not consensus. Indeed, irreconcilable values may be at issue. Probably all one can hope for here is an appreciation of this.

The prime resource in this paradigm is the professor, and his/her ability to re-order and restructure to meet and challenge the patterning he/she has discovered.

NOTES

1. New Yorker, July 10, 1978, p. 31.

2. Logan, Robert A. "Nothing But the Facts—A Critical Analysis of Science Writing in American Newspapers," Doctoral dissertation, School of Journalism, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

3. Szasz, T. S. Pain and Pleasure. New York: Basic Books, 1957.

4. Perkinson, Henry. "Popper's Fallibilism," ETC: A Review of General Semantics. Vol. 35, No. 1, March 1978, pp. 5-19.

5. Popper, Karl. Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963.

6. The classic work is Stephenson's Study of Behavior, University of Chicago Press, 1953. More recently, his series of articles on "Applications of Communication Theory," are quite helpful. They may be found in Psychological Record, 1970-1973 issues.

7. See "Concerns About Mass Media and Society Among Nebraska Sophomore and Senior Journalism Students" by Wilma Crumley and Michael Stricklin.

   See "A Communication Paradigm For Use In The Classroom" by Beth Bohling and Wilma Crumley.

   Both papers presented at the Regional Meeting of the Mass Communication and Society Division, AEJ, April 13-14, 1978. Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana.